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ABSTRACT

Part of the transition process for students in educational leadership programs is mastery of the scholarly writing process. To address this need, the faculty of a southwestern university designed a scholarly writing project for incoming doctoral students. This paper presents the results of a study of student responses to the critiquing process used in the project. The subjects, all professional educators, included all students who were currently enrolled or had graduated in the last 4 years. Data collected from the student cohort (n=10) during the first semester of graduate study (when they were first introduced to the scholarly writing process), included students' written and verbal reactions and journal entries documenting their reactions. Additional data was derived from focus interviews with all students (n=37) over the four-year period. Analysis of the data showed that the critiquing process was perceived as the most influential element in understanding the scholarly writing process and producing an adequate scholarly product. Although most students expressed doubts before beginning the course about their ability to critique others, by the end of the course, most felt the process allowed them to view their own writing more objectively (although some still expressed uncertainty about the critiquing process). (Contains 21 references.) (CH)

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Teaching Doctoral Students Writing: Negotiating the Borders Between the World of Practice and Doctoral Study

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Rosemary S. Caffarella
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Teaching Doctoral Students Writing: Negotiating the Borders Between the World of Practice and Doctoral Study

One of the borders that students in educational leadership programs need to negotiate is moving from the world of practice to that of the scholar/practitioner. This border crossing includes learning how to think and write like a scholar. In some of our doctoral programs we have observed that the teaching of this process often comes in the form of "too little and too late." More specifically, some students may not be exposed to the scholarly writing process until the dissertation stage, which for some students creates problems in their ability to complete the doctoral program. Those of us who facilitate helping students learn the scholarly process find ourselves from time to time asking the following question: Is there a better way to teach these novice scholars what we know about this seemingly mysterious process of scholarly writing?

To respond to this question, the educational leadership faculty in a southwestern university designed a course assignment to teach incoming doctoral students, most of whom are full time practitioners, the scholarly writing process. This assignment, termed the scholarly writing project (SWP), had three major purposes: (1) to investigate a specific area of interest within the content parameters of the class; (2) to engage in the process of critiquing a colleague's work; and (3) to incorporate feedback from colleagues and instructors in redrafting a formal academic paper. Students were required as part of the SWP to produce three versions of a scholarly paper on a topic related to one of the themes of the class. Two drafts and a final copy of the paper were produced. The first two drafts were reviewed by a student colleague and a faculty member; written feedback was provided for each draft in the form of a formal critique. Following each critique, students prepared a revised draft of their papers along with a written response addressing the reviewers' comments. In their response to the critiques, students indicated how they addressed each of the reviewers' comments, including their rationale for not incorporating their suggestions. In addition, students were required to meet at least once with one of the instructors to discuss their paper; however, most students chose to meet with an instructor more frequently.

In developing the SWP, we tried to simulate what scholarly writing entails. We incorporated materials recommended in the literature on writing and our own experience as faculty with the scholarly writing process. Three components were included as part of this assignment: content,

process, and critique. The *content* element focused on the ability of scholars to present an argument for a specific thesis which was grounded in literature and/or empirical research (Hawley, 1993; Melroy, 1994; Olson, 1992). The *process* element acknowledged that scholarly writing was an ongoing process of writing and rewriting (Curren, 1993; Dugan, 1991; Lamott, 1994; Olson, 1992; Richardson, 1990; Sullivan, 1991). Finally, the *critique* element consisted of being able to receive and use critical feedback and to give helpful feedback as students moved to the final draft of their work (Ashton-Jones, 1992; Boice, 1992; Fiske, 1992; Lamott, 1994; Olson, 1992; Richardson, 1990; Wolcott, 1990). Most of the literature to support our development of scholarly writing came from scholars in the humanities and the field of composition. Those writing from an educational perspective focused primarily on either the content of the piece or descriptions of what should be included in a scholarly work (e.g., Bean, 1996; Creswell, 1994; Melroy, 1994; Rudestam and Newton, 1992).

To better understand students' perceptions of scholarly writing, we were curious about how this process affected their thoughts, feelings, and skills. Learning from students' perceptions about writing has been stressed more recently in the literature on writing (Bishop, 1993; Clark, 1993; Lamott, 1994; Melroy, 1994), encompassing the constructivist or hermeneutic perspective on writing (Clark, 1993). We could only locate two empirical studies which sought student opinions on the writing process (Bishop, 1993; Koncel and Carney, 1992), and of those two, only the Koncel and Carney study examined the perceptions of students in a graduate professional program. They found a gap in thinking between students and faculty as to what constitutes scholarly writing, discovering what students wanted most was to learn how to write more concisely, follow a prescribed format, and use correct terminology. Faculty, on the other hand, believed students needed to improve their ability to make solid arguments supported by evidence and theory.

To obtain students' perceptions about the scholarly writing process, we collected a variety of information, including their self-perceptions as writers, the help required to produce a SWP, the value of critiquing one anothers' papers, and the effects of the SWP on their degree program and professional practices. For this particular paper, we report the data about the critiquing process, which appeared to have the most impact on students' perceptions about scholarly writing. Discussed in the remainder of this paper are the methods of inquiry and data sources used in the study, the findings related to the change in perceptions about scholarly writing and the elements of the SWP that most influenced those changes, and a discussion of those findings.

Methods of Inquiry and Data Sources

This study was exploratory and qualitative in nature. The subjects included all students who were enrolled or had graduated in the last four years from a doctoral program in educational leadership at a southwestern university. Two types of data were collected. One data source consisted of gathering the reactions of a student cohort (n=10) about the scholarly writing process during their first semester of graduate study when they were first introduced to the scholarly writing process. Of these 10 respondents, six were males, four were females, and one student was of Hispanic origin and the rest were Caucasian. The majority of these students (9 of 10 or 90%) were working full time in addition to attending school. Throughout the semester, the two professors teaching the course periodically gathered students' written and verbal reactions to the scholarly writing process; students also kept a journal documenting their reactions.

The second type of data entailed asking all students who had been introduced to the scholarly writing process over the past four years (n=37 or 90% of the total population) to participate in a focus group interview. If students lived too far from campus, they were asked to complete a questionnaire covering the same questions as asked during the focus group interviews. In this group of 37 respondents, there was an almost equal portion of male and female students, the majority being Caucasian. About one-third of them were still involved in course work, one-third were taking their comprehensive examinations or were conducting their dissertations, and one-third had graduated from the program. All of the respondents were professional educators, with about 80% being employed full time when these data were gathered. The questions asked in the focus groups and on the questionnaires allowed students to reflect on their subsequent reactions to the scholarly writing process and its impact on their academic and professional work. Because data were collected from four student cohorts, their perceptions were obtained as early as six months after completing the scholarly writing project and as long as three years later. These different types of data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965), which resulted in the creation of categories, cluster categories, and then overall themes.

Findings

In examining the factors which influenced students' perceptions about the SWP and their final written products, preparing and receiving critiques emerged as the most significant

component. Because perceptual data were collected before, during, and after developing the scholarly writing projects, we are able to examine developmental trends in students' perceptions. We begin by reporting doctoral students' reactions to preparing critiques for their peer colleagues, noting their perceptions before beginning the SWP, during the semester when the SWP was completed, and after the SWP assignment was finished. Similarly, their views about receiving written critiques are examined. Finally, the most influential elements of the critiquing process are explored. To highlight our findings, students' voices concerning the critiquing process are reflected in verbatim quotes taken from their written products and focus group interviews.

Preparing Critiques

As mentioned earlier, the methodology of the study allowed for the collection of data from graduate students as they were actually involved in the scholarly writing project. To determine the developmental trends in their perceptions, students' reactions are reported before beginning the scholarly writing project, during the semester in which their scholarly products were being produced, and following the completion of the project.

Before beginning scholarly writing. Most students remarked they had little, if any, experience prior to entering this doctoral program with writing scholarly products or with providing feedback about their peers' writing. Not surprisingly, there was some apprehension about reading a colleague's paper and providing direct feedback. This apprehension manifested itself in two ways. First, because of their lack of experienced and confidence, students questioned their ability to provide meaningful feedback to another person. Their uneasiness was revealed in these comments:

> "I do not know enough to help the writer."
>
> "What if [the other person] has made a huge mistake and I don't see it? Does that make me a poor writer?"
>
> "Who am I to judge another [person] when I myself am doing poorly in the process?"

Second, besides questioning their ability, there was a sense of excitement about the process and what they would learn. This more curious and enthusiastic viewpoint was clearly communicated by one student who wrote:

> "I am excited and optimistic [because] I have seen the title of the paper. . . and feel I will learn alot."

During scholarly writing. As they gained some experience in providing feedback to their peers, new insights about the critiquing process emerged as well as some continuing concerns. On one hand, the opportunity to critique a peer's work raised the level of concern about how their feedback would be accepted and provided a way for them to compare their own work with that of a peer. These reactions are reflected in students' own words:

> "I'm anxious to see how my feedback was accepted and [if it] made any difference in my partner's paper."
>
> "I was unsure of the reaction concerning some of my comments and did not want to upset my colleague."
>
> "I was relieved to read someone's paper and compare it to my writing ability."

On the other hand, the initial self-doubt of their capability to provide meaningful feedback to peer colleagues still lingered. Comments such as "not wanting to give poor advice," "not being able to provide more confident help," and "feeling inadequate" were expressed repeatedly, indicating a continuing questioning of their ability to critique one anothers' work.

After finishing scholarly writing. When students had completed the scholarly writing project and had the opportunity to reflect back on their experience doing critiques, there was far less emotional reaction to the process than before beginning the process or when they were engaged in it. Emotionally-laded words such as "nervous," "uneasy," or "queasy" were not used to describe the process. Nevertheless, students continued to express some reservations and concerns about their contributions and revealed some new insights about their own writing. Their lingering concerns ranged from the type or level of feedback to provide to the continued questioning of the value their critiques had for their partners, which are evident in these comments:

> "It was hard to get [students] to give feedback at a deeper, more substantial level."
>
> "I'm still a little spooked from how much feedback to give a peer."
>
> "What level of feedback should I give? There's only so much feedback that I think people can handle at a time."
>
> "This was my fear. . . I would read over [the paper] two or three times and go 'it's perfect' [and] I can't find anything wrong with it. I'd give it back to them with 'great job' written across the top. Then they get it back from one of [the professors] and it's ripped to shreds. And it would just confirm that I don't understand any of this and I don't have a clue as to how to do [critiquing]."

Besides these lingering self-doubts, students expressed positive aspects of having conducted reviews of their peers' writing after all was said and done. The major advantage of reviewing one

anothers' work was the learning that took place. As the emotional fears of critiquing subsided, the most common reactions were the opportunity to compare other peoples' writing with their own work and the new information about a topic they gained by reading other papers.

Over time, students' reactions to critiquing one anothers' written products revealed some changes in their attitudes and some lasting impressions. As they gained experience providing written feedback to their peers, graduate students' anxiety and apprehension tended to dissipate. Although feelings of comfort with the critiquing process emerged, they never lost the sense of their lack of efficacy as reviewers. Many students commented about their perceived lack of credibility as reviewers long after completing the process. On a more positive note, some of these students' earliest perceptions about the value of the process, especially as a means for comparing their work with a colleague, grew stronger the longer they were involved in peer critiquing. To contrast these findings on students' reactions to preparing critiques, we now turn our attention to their views about receiving critiques from peers and professors.

Receiving Critiques

Just as for preparing critiques, students' perceptions about receiving critiques throughout the semester were obtained. Once again, these data were collected at different points in time--before, during, and after completing the project--in order to determine developmental trends and patterns.

Before beginning scholarly writing. The novelty of receiving ongoing feedback from peers and instructors raised initial concerns and excitement among many students. Once again, emotions ran high in anticipation of receiving feedback from several people. Similar to their early reactions to preparing critiques, students' feelings ranged from insecurity with their draft to keen interest in how other saw their work, emotions which are best captured in their own words:

> "I'm afraid of the feedback and I wonder if the person reading mine would even be interested in the topic."
>
> "[I am] very disappointed about my own writing."
>
> "I'm anxious, but not in a bad way. I am actually interested to see what is said."
>
> "[My] feelings are dependent on who the reader is. Somehow, I'm not as anxious as I thought I'd be. . . Perhaps it's the release of letting [the paper] go."

During scholarly writing. As they were receiving their critiques and were having to respond to feedback provided by peers and professors, students voiced some comfort with the process.

Comments such as being "genuinely glad to receive suggestions" and "[my] fear and anxiety have been reduced by the way we approached critiquing" surfaced. However, most students remained extremely apprehensive about the process and how to reconcile conflicting feedback, especially from the professors. The following comments reflect the tension and conflict students felt in reacting to feedback:

> "I feel awkward responding to a critique. I'm not sure how much time to spend on items."
>
> "I felt that the paper was really coming together, but after receiving the second feedback, boy was I wrong. The feelings I had. . . first [I was] made, really mad. Then I met with [the professor] later in the week, I had cooled down. After I met with [the professor], I knew I had to start all over again."
>
> " I detest having to deal with feedback from both professors."
>
> "I feel really uncomfortable having to choose [between two professors' critiques]."

As these reactions indicate, the greatest sources of dissonance arose in not knowing how best to respond to various suggestions, especially conflicting feedback from different professors. Students' uncertainty with how to resolve contradictory messages from faculty seemed to underscore the lack of confidence in their writing ability. Without a sense of assurance and efficacy about their writing, students had great difficulty explaining to professors why they were not going to follow their suggestions.

After finishing scholarly writing. Upon completing the scholarly writing project, strong emotions still emerged regarding being critiqued by others. One student commented with a metaphor, indicating that receiving critiques was "scary . . . like an intellectual striptease." "Frustration" is probably the best word to describe some of the students' feelings, frustration with a lack of assistance from a peer reviewer and frustration with having to respond to conflicting feedback from different professors. These emotional reactions are evident in the following comments:

> "I really disliked the type of feedback I received from my colleague. I felt that the student colleague was disagreeing with my topic, rather than critiquing my work."
>
> "My [peer partner] didn't have the confidence from experience to understand what I was writing, so it really wasn't very helpful."
>
> ". . . and that became kind of tough because of being a novice scholarly writer, which [professor's] advice to take."
>
> "One of my frustrations was that I felt . . . if I chose what [one professor] said, then I was going to have to discount what [the other professor] said. And my ego and humility said I'm not going to blow that off. This [professor] has a doctorate who's way up there. I can't blow [the professor] off. I felt really uncomfortable having to choose."

Despite these frustrations, many students were more comfortable with receiving feedback and more confident about their ability to write a worthwhile scholarly piece:

> ". . . you begin receiving approval from people who really are expert and doing the very thing they are asking you to do. . . But I found sharing the paper with both a peer and faculty members to be really profitable personally, from the standpoint that I can say that I submitted this to a pretty high authority on writing skills and research skills and got some approval. So, I walked away feeling pretty good."

> "[Receiving critiques] boosted my perception of myself as a scholarly writer. The verbal and written feedback I received regarding my thoughts and writing about the topic added validity to what I perceived to be an issue worth studying."

Contrasting students' earliest perceptions about receiving critiques with their thoughts when the process was finished revealed some consistent reactions as well as some developmental changes. A strong sense of emotion ran through students' responses from the beginning of the scholarly writing process through the completion of the project. Emotions that began as apprehension and anxiety about how others would view their written work turned into frustration and sometimes anger with the quality of the feedback they received from peer reviewers and/or with the dilemma of how to reconcile conflicting feedback from different professors. At the two extremes feedback either lacked quality and substance or it was contradictory and very difficult to resolve. Over time, however, the quality of the feedback received and the supportive manner in which it was delivered allowed most students to view their own writing more objectively, leading to increased confidence in their writing ability.

Most Influential Elements of the Critiquing Process

These reactions of graduate students suggest their lack of experience with such an intensive and ongoing writing assignment contributed to their anxieties about how to provide helpful feedback and how their writing would be critically evaluated by others. As was noted above, concerns about their critiquing expertise and how to reconcile conflicting feedback did not completely vanish; however, students expressed noticeable growth in their critiquing and writing ability.

As students spoke about giving and receiving feedback, they felt certain factors were responsible for building their confidence as critiquers and writers. Foremost among these elements were the personalized, face-to-face feedback they received and the iterative or ongoing nature of feedback. Personalizing the process allowed students to better comprehend how to improve their written products without feeling personally attacked. Similarly, knowing that

multiple drafts would be completed reduced the pressure to create a perfect product the first time. These two elements are captured in students' voices:

> "The piece that helped me the most was sitting down before I started writing and talking through the outline with one of the instructors."
>
> "Face-to-face feedback and not correspondence, not e-mail, not drop me a note [helped the most]. It was a hammer it out back and forth discussion."
>
> ". . . I figure the whole concept of a second draft [helped the most]. . . I'm used to going back for a second opinion, but not from the person [from whom] I got the first opinion."

Conclusions and Discussion

For the graduate students in this research study, the critiquing process was perceived as the most influential element in helping them to understand the scholarly writing process and producing an adequate scholarly product. Yet, for these students, being asked to provide feedback on their peers' writing as well as receiving multiple critiques of their own written products were novel. Despite the power of critiquing, there is very little literature describing this process and its importance in developing scholarly works. Rather, what is stressed about scholarly writing is what should be included in a scholarly paper and the mechanics of writing. When the critiquing process is discussed at all, it tends to be addressed in a paragraph or two and as more of an "aside," claiming scholars should get someone to review their drafts prior to submission or students should do as part of the dissertation process (e.g., Boice, 1992; Creswell, 1994; Olson, 1992; Richardson, 1990; and Rudestam and Newton, 1992.) (The exception to this is the work by Wolcott (1990) and Lamott (1994), which is discussed below.) In addition to the brevity and lack of clarity about what the critiquing process is, we only found one empirical study related to teaching the scholarly writing process to graduate students (Koncel and Carney, 1992). Although these authors did not discuss the critiquing process per se, their findings did confirm the importance of graduate students in professional schools needing and wanting feedback about their writing, which is similar to our results.

Not surprisingly, there was initial apprehension and anxiety about preparing and receiving feedback, feelings which tended to wane over time, but not completely disappear. With time and practice, the scholarly writing process eased students' fears about critiquing one anothers' written work and increased their sense of efficacy and self-confidence as writers. Nevertheless, feelings of self-doubt lingered, especially regarding their inadequacy as reviewers and their

inability to resolve conflicting feedback from professors. As Wolcott (1990) so astutely observed, "Timely and useful feedback on writing is hard to give and hard to take" (p. 43). He advises writers to anticipate disagreements in the feedback and how these might be resolved. He also stresses that feedback implies nurturance, which most authors crave, and draws attention to what has already been completed, versus where writers may want to go with their material. Therefore, Wolcott advises writers not to seek this feedback too soon in the process, and "select readers with care and instruct them as to the kind of criticism [they] believe will be helpful" (p. 44).

Perhaps the most striking difference between students' perceptions about providing and receiving feedback was their emotional responses. As they gained experience providing critiques, their comments became much less emotionally charged. When providing feedback, students' initial nervousness and anxiety gave way to a sense of growth, especially the ability to compare and contrast their work with their peers. In stark contrast, emotions about receiving critiques ran high throughout the process, and were still quite evident long after completing the assignment. For some students, frustrations with the type of feedback they received appeared to build over time. Not only were they disappointed with the lack of useful feedback from their peers, but a few students also were extremely frustrated with how to deal with conflicting feedback from different professors. In contrast, other students perceived receiving the critiques in very positive emotional terms, voiced by such sentiments as students feeling other people were with them, receiving approval for their work, and in general feeling quite satisfied with their progress.

The current literature on critiquing, and especially on receiving critiques, almost totally ignores the positive and negative emotional aspects of receiving feedback on one's writing. Rather, the typical advice given is to be non-defensive when receiving feedback and to learn how to manage negative feedback with grace (Boice, 1992; Rudestam and Newton, 1992). Only two of the studies we reviewed even hinted at the fact that receiving critical feedback can be very difficult emotionally for writers (Fiske, 1992; Lamott, 1994). Of these two, Lamott (1994) does the best job in exploring the emotionality of receiving feedback on one's work. In her personal reflections, she relates the following:

> My first response if they have a lot of suggestions is never profound relief that I have someone in my life who will be honest with me and help me do the very best work of which I am capable. No, my first thought is, 'Well, I'm sorry, but I can't be friends with you anymore, because you have too many problems. And you have a

bad personality. And a bad character.'

> Sometimes I can't get words to come out of my mouth because I am so disappointed. . . Criticism is very hard to take. . . But these friends usually talk me into going through the manuscript with them. . . so by the end, I am breathing a great sigh of relief and even gratitude. When someone reliable gives you feedback you now have some true sense of your work's effect on people. (pp. 166-167)

Lamott (1994) also observes she could probably do this writing process alone and have it be less painful, but for her it is easier to have people help her and improves her work. The students in our study echoed the sentiments of Lamott (1994) and Fiske (1992) that the feedback process can be highly emotional. Therefore, we believe when teaching novice scholars about the scholarly writing process it is important to acknowledge emotions, both good and bad, as legitimate and healthy reactions to the writing process.

In speculating about the difference in students' emotional reactions when preparing versus receiving critiques, we have two observations. First, this difference may be a result of the personal investment involved in producing a scholarly product, especially for doctoral students. Although providing feedback to other graduate students builds mutual trust and support for many of the students, they are keenly aware their ultimate success in the program will not be assessed by the quality of their peer feedback. Rather, they know their own writing will be critically evaluated throughout their program of studies, culminating with a dissertation. The fact of the matter is that graduate students, and most professionals, are judged on what they write. With the stakes so high about their writing ability, it is not surprising graduate students are so emotionally invested in how their work is critiqued. Second, if writing is a personal act (Lamott, 1994), then students' feelings of self-worth as productive scholars and learners may be tied to this public process of having their work critiqued. Therefore, the critiques they receive may take on a very personal meaning, ranging from validating their worth as writers and scholars to questioning their ability to write and whether or not they should continue in a doctoral program.

In examining the literature on scholarly writing, as noted earlier in the paper, what became apparent even in the limited material that was available on the critiquing process was that almost all of this literature came from fields outside of education and the social sciences. Other than Wolcott's (1990) book, the process of giving and receiving feedback as an important component of the scholarly writing process is allotted only one or two paragraphs or is ignored altogether (Creswell, 1994; Madsen, 1992; Melroy, 1994; Rossman, 1995; Rudestam and Newton, 1992). Considering the voices of our students about the value and importance of feedback, we were

surprised critiquing was not given more attention in the literature. Our recommendation, based on our students' observations and our own experiences as faculty, is that treatment of the scholarly writing process should include more in-depth material about both giving and receiving feedback. This might include guidelines as to what skills reviewers should possess, what types of feedback to include in the critiquing process, how to handle conflicting feedback, and an acknowledgment that being critiqued is both a rational and an emotional process for most people, especially for novice scholars.

In summary, our students perceived that the critiquing process was an extremely influential element of the scholarly writing process both in terms of learning about the process and improving their final product. As one student observed, the most influential element was:

> . . . the interaction that I had with others regarding my work. . . at first it did not seem fitting that I would incorporate into my scholarly writing project an idea or suggestion made by someone else. I felt that I should somehow give credit to them. . . Exchanging works in progress not only helped me learn about the scholarly writing process, but it gave me the confidence to hand my work to another [person]."

Therefore, we would suggest that as professors work with their students in teaching the scholarly writing process, they listen to the voices of their students and incorporate into their teaching and mentoring of students throughout their doctoral programs how to both provide and receive feedback in an effective and helpful manner. Furthermore, we recommend that we as faculty think through more carefully what the critiquing process is all about, and prepare materials for students which will help them incorporate this process into their practice as students and professional educators.

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